

Corps prepares for what could be round two as Rita approaches

NEW ORLEANS, Sept. 19 -- Three weeks after metro New Orleans was pummeled by the high winds and storm surge of Hurricane Katrina, emergency responders of the Army Corps of Engineers are preparing for the possibility of a second round of severe weather as Tropical Storm Rita approaches the Gulf of Mexico.

As Rita approaches southern Florida, the National Weather Service's National Hurricane Center indicates the storm is expected to become a hurricane, enter the Gulf of Mexico and threaten the Louisiana and Texas coasts late this week.

“The flood protection system of southeastern Louisiana does not ensure the city will be protected from flooding resulting from storms or hurricanes,” stressed Col. Richard Wagenaar, the Corps’ New Orleans District commander. “We are working with our federal, state, local and contractor partners to ensure we are prepared to respond to the storm.”

More than 800 filled sandbags are on hand, and an additional 2,500 have been ordered. Work continues around the clock to make emergency repairs to damaged canal walls and levees.

Working with local levee districts and drainage authorities, the Corps has begun re-distributing pumps, construction equipment and materials to municipalities for emergency response. Efforts continue to evaluate flood control structures in the region to determine what preventive measures can be implemented.

“In addition to materials, we have also pre-positioned contractors throughout the region to rapidly respond after severe weather,” Wagenaar said.

A team of Corps experts has also been established both in New Orleans and at the regional office in Vicksburg, Miss.

Since landfall of Hurricane Katrina, the Corps has been performing detailed assessments of about 350 miles of hurricane levees and developing a comprehensive, prioritized plan to repair them and their associated pumping stations.